

# Conservation Education - Interpretation



## Chapter Goals:

After completing this chapter, volunteers should be able to:

- Discuss what interpretation is.
- Identify and understand components of an interpretative experience.
- Understand the differences between a topic and a theme and the importance/functions each serves.

*It is Saturday morning. You are waiting at the benches near the trailhead at the local nature center. A number of your nature hike participants have already arrived – a boisterous group of Scouts, a family with two children probably under the age of six. A young couple holding hands and they are followed by a mature woman with two or three guidebooks tucked under her arm. The hands on your watch reach 10:00 a.m. It is time to start the hike.*

Many Master Naturalists will fulfill their service hours working directly with the public as volunteer guides for local sites or as program presenters for schools, summer camps or other public functions. This kind of public contact work may be broken into three broad areas of function:

- *Orientation* – Greeting visitors to a site, collecting fees, directing visitors to site opportunities and providing operational information.
- *Education* – Formalized experiences and transfer of information that meets specific learning objectives, usually within a non-voluntary setting. Participants may be driven by external motivations, such as grades or certifications.
- *Interpretation* – Informal or recreational experiences and transfer of information, within a voluntary setting. Participants are internally motivated by an intrinsic satisfaction with their experience, with the experience viewed as another recreational opportunity.

## What is interpretation?

The term “interpreter” came into common use in the 1930’s. It is a confusing term. Interpreters are often asked “. . . and what languages do you speak?” However, it is still considered the best term for the profession. After all, the secrets of nature and history are often “foreign” to our audiences!

While many people mark the birth of interpretation with Freeman Tilden’s classic work *Interpreting Our Heritage* (1957), others point to Enos Mills’ *Adventure of a Nature Guide* and *Essays in Interpretation*, as the philosophical foundation of the profession. Enos Mills was an interpretive guide in the Rocky Mountains from the late 1880s to the early 1920s. He published his work in 1920. This book was a pioneer in the development of interpretation as a profession. Mills was a close friend of John Muir. The principles set forth by Tilden and Mills have many things in common and remain standard in the field today. Definitions of “interpretation” may offer insight into the profession:

“An educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information” (Tilden, 1957).

“Interpretation is a communication process designed to reveal meanings and relationships of our cultural and natural heritage to the public through first-hand experiences with objects, artifacts, landscapes, or sites.” - Interpretation Canada, 1976

“Interpretation is a process, a rendering, by which visitors see, learn, experience and are inspired firsthand . . . Interpretation is revelation based upon information” (Beck and Cable, 1998)

The operative words seem to be “reveal experiences, meanings and relationships.” Good interpretation is always based on factual information, but it goes much further. Sam Ham, the author of *Environmental Interpretation: A Practical Guide for People with Big Ideas and Small Budgets*, “Tilden saw interpretation as an approach to communicating which stresses the transfer of ideas and relationships rather than isolated facts and figures. Although an interpreter may use factual information to illustrate points and clarify meanings, it’s the points and meanings that he or she is trying to first communicate, not the facts. This is what distinguishes interpretation from conventional instruction” (Ham, 1992). This communication, coupled with a quality experience, forms memorable interpretation.

Interpretation has been described as “an approach to communication” (Ham, 1992, pg.3). It is a “certain way” to communicate or educate, that has been developed and proven successful in formal and non-formal educational settings. Anything can be communicated using interpretive techniques: medical information, 17<sup>th</sup> century literature themes, and even historical events! As a future Idaho Master Naturalist, you may be participating in education activities. We encourage you to use interpretation as an approach to education. As you learn about interpretation and apply it to teaching about nature, remember the principles of interpretation can be applied to any subject.

In general, interpretation takes one of two forms. The names of these forms may vary from author to author, but the categories remain the same:

- *Static interpretation* – Any interpretive contact that does not involve a living person to facilitate the contact. Brochures, signs, exhibits and posters are all examples of static interpretive items. Keep in mind that your resource base – the plants, buildings, artifacts, landscapes, smells and sounds – is, in and of itself, a static interpretive display.
- *Personal services interpretation* – Interpretive contacts that are facilitated by a living person. Guided tours, slide shows, living history demonstrations and campfire talks are common examples.

While this chapter focuses on personal services interpretation, the “thinking process” relates to static items as well. Practiced interpreters find that an organized thinking process becomes second nature to program and materials development.

## Components of an Interpretive Experience

The information you present is only a part of the total interpretive experience. To be truly effective, you must consider the factors that will influence your presentation. These include visitor, presentation, and resource components. Each of these is worthy of separate study.

Examination of the **visitor component** can include marketing, sociology, psychology, learning theory and demographics. The **presentation component** includes the mechanics of speech, audio-visual aids, personal presentation styles and organization of information. **Resource components** can include safety information, access, conservation and multiple-use issues, in addition to the natural and cultural resources themselves.

### The Visitor Component

New interpreters are frequently advised to “know the visitor.” This includes who they are, where they are from, basic cultural orientation and other demographic information. In practice, this is

no simple matter! Sites frequently operate for years without gathering specific visitor information. If you are working with a more homogenous group, such as a school or hobby club, you may have a good feel for your visitor. For many interpreters, the first glimpse of the visitor comes when they arrive for the program. One thing is known about all visitors; they come to a site or program for their own reasons. Interpreters must acknowledge and respect the validity of those reasons. John Veverka gives an example: “. . . the main activities of interest cited by most zoo visitors are picnicking and being with friends and family. Seeing the animals is often third. Learning about the animals is “way down the list.” He cautions us to remember that visitors are in a “vacation frame of mind” and says, “They don’t want to become experts in the subject you are presenting, they just want to have fun learning about the site or topic at hand.” (Veverka, 1994).

Think about the diverse group described in the introduction and list possible reasons for their attendance at the fictional hike. The Scouts may be earning a badge or enjoying a visit with friends. Mom and Dad may be seeking a diversion for their young, active children. The young couple may wish to share some time together in a pleasant setting. The mature woman might hope to see a new bird. Awareness of these motivations gives the interpreter a better feel for the visitor.

Visitors bring their own set of “baggage” with them when attending a presentation. Meaning is inherent in people, not in words or terms. Your idea of a “tall tree” depends on your mental picture of all the trees you have ever seen. It would not mean the same to a visitor from the Kansas plains or the redwood forests of the Pacific Coast. This is why good interpreters frequently use comparisons to common objects to describe characteristics accurately. This simple technique helps close the experience gap in very diverse groups of visitors.

### **The Presentation Component**

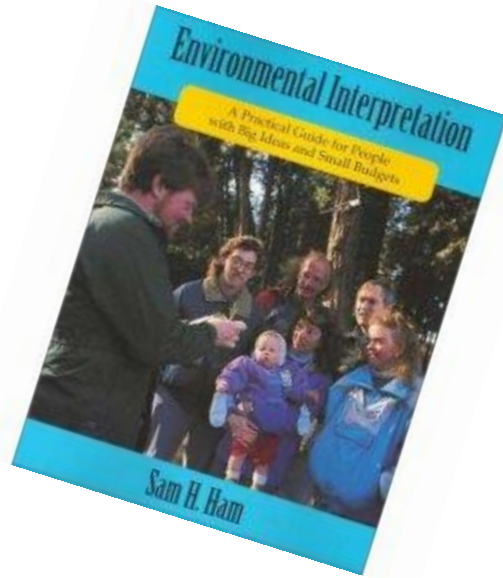
All interpreters benefit from an occasional review of good public speaking practices. Many good manuals are available for this purpose. More important is the mindset of the interpreter, who must never forget that the interpretive experience is not about the presenter. It is “about the visitor” and the resource. The interpreter is not the experience. They only interpret by acting as a conduit, facilitator, and intermediary between the visitor and the resource. Think about your own interpretive experiences. Chances are the most memorable were those where the interpreter was not the focus of attention.

Interpretation should be:

- Pleasurable
- Relevant
- Organized

- Thematic
- Credible

If you are properly practicing interpretation, your audience will be having fun. They will not be daydreaming, looking around, answering their cell phone, or having side conversations, because whatever is being said or done will be **pleasurable**. Our brains produce endorphins when we are engaging in pleasurable activities. These chemicals make us feel great. When we are not having fun or getting pleasure from an activity, the chemicals decrease. We start to daydream. Daydreaming takes our brain to a place where we find pleasure and produce more endorphins! If you want people to learn, make their experience pleasurable. Some ways to increase pleasure are smiling, humor, music, and two-way communication.



Talks, walks, guided tours and individual contact with a visitor can make interpretation more pleasurable for the audience if you do some simple things. Smile, make eye contact, use hand gestures, use props and be enthusiastic. If you do not care for your topic or theme, you probably will not have much fun doing the program. Your audience will sense it.

**Relevancy** can be broken down into two sub-categories: meaningful and personal. A presentation about the biodiversity of the Galapagos Islands is interesting, but if given at Round Lake State Park, in northern Idaho, it is irrelevant. This aspect of interpretation makes a lot of sense. Plan your educational program with relevancy in mind. Think about where you are and with whom you are talking. Make new information meaningful to your audience by helping them connect it to something they already know. An interpreter at Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument might describe the eruption of the volcano using everyday items. Using honey, toothpaste and a bag of flour, the interpreter can help visitors understand that the consistency of Mount St. Helens lava was more like toothpaste and less like honey. The ash (pulverized rock) emitted was like flour.

Being personal is another way to create relevancy when you teach. We talked about connecting new information to something that the audience “knows.” Being personal connects new information to something about which the audience “cares.” How do you know what that is? While you do not know specifics, you can count on your audience caring about “themselves, their family, their well-being, quality of life, values, principles, beliefs and convictions” (Ham

1993, pg. 13). Use the word “you” in your interpretive talks. Better yet, get to know the names of some audience members and use them. Find out where people live or what their occupation is, how many kids they have or if they have pets. You can incorporate some of this into your talk to make your message more personal.

**Organization** is key to successful interpretation. If your information is organized, people do not have to think hard to follow your train of thought or connect the concepts. Spoon-feed them the connections. People’s minds start to wander if they are required to think too hard about how the information fits together. Imagine opening a novel to page 50 and trying to figure out what is happening. It would take a lot of effort to organize the characters and the story line.

Introduce your points in a logical progression. This requires planning. A co-worker described another co-worker’s presentation style, “Tom is a great presenter. He is so enthusiastic and funny. He is passionate and knowledgeable. The kids love him, but he is all over the place.” It appears this person is a pretty good teacher, but lacks organization. The messages might be organized in his mind, but he is not thinking of how the information is presented to the audience.

The final characteristic of interpretation is **thematic**. Themes are different from topics. Your talk, brochure, website, or whatever medium you choose should have both! “Native plants” is a topic. “Native Plants Can Increase Your Quality of Life” is a theme. “Bees” are a topic. “You Would Go Hungry If It Weren’t for Bees” is a theme.

**Credibility** is a major factor in the presentation component. Commentary and experiences, based on fact not perception or personal bias, will establish credibility. This is more difficult than it appears on the surface. Examine the facts you plan to present. Can you actually point to a documented source for that information? Just as the visitor sees everything through his own experience, so does the interpreter. It is acceptable to express an opinion or to include undocumented oral traditions in a presentation and be sure to present them as such. Balanced presentations fairly represent all sides of an issue or topic. They can actually increase the amount of support for an important idea, by establishing the credibility of the speaker.

### **The Resource Component**

To be effective, the information you are presenting should be solidly rooted in the resource confronting the visitor. One experienced interpreter expressed this as an interpretive rule. “If you can’t see it, you don’t get to talk about it.” While some see this as a limiting factor, it actually helps interpreters identify creative avenues for presenting complex information. For instance, when talking about a prescribed burn, the interpreter might bring photographs of the field prior to the burn, a month after the burn, a year after the burn to show the progression of that fire-disturbed area. The interpreter could then challenge the group to predict changes for the area, based on what they know. Pointing out charred bits of stumps, heightened canopy, lack of

dense, dead vegetation and other clues can help the visitor “see” the fire and feel successful in their ability to “discover” evidence that the fire occurred. The more you can base your presentation in the immediate resource, the higher your chances of facilitating a memorable, effective experience.

Take inventory of all the available resources. Stretch your mental resource inventory beyond visible plants, animals, buildings and artifacts. Landscape vistas, smells, sounds or silence and reflective space may be valuable resources that help the visitor visualize and internalize the information presented.

Remember, the resource can tell its own story. You are only the interpreter. You do not have to talk the whole time. You can pose questions. Allow people time to explore, think about answers and the place they are visiting.

## **One Approach to Developing Interpretive Experiences**

Like any other skill, program planning involves practice, evaluation, correction and more practice. Although each individual has their own formula for program development, many perform the following steps at some point:

### **Review the Site Mission**

Why the site or resource is there? Why is it accessible to the public? Keep this vision and mission in mind. Your program should be a part of the larger whole for the site. Interpretation that does not relate, benefit or integrate with other site functions is likely to fall victim to a lack of budget, staffing, support and visitor interest.

### **Inventory the Resource**

What resources will the visitor contact? With what do you have to work? Do not solely rely on your own impressions, especially if you are very familiar with the site. Often, familiarity blinds us to the resources in front of us. Invite a friend who has not been to the site to walk through with you. What do they notice? What generates questions, invokes interest, or appeals to them? Another critical consideration is what does the condition of the resource communicate to the visitor? Studies reveal that visitors believe what they see and pay less attention to what they are being told. On a tour through a historic site, the visitor will mentally “include” the grounds around any buildings. If the grounds, plants and arrangements do not accurately reflect the time period being interpreted, we unconsciously send the message that “This is the way it was.” even though we may say something different. Similarly, an eroded, poorly maintained nature trail sends the subliminal message that “This is okay. This is nature.” Make sure what you are saying is accurately reflected by the resource in front of the visitor. Carefully weigh the risks of interpreting degraded resources or consider integrating a “call to action” into your presentation.

## **Choose Specific Ideas and Outcomes**

This is the most important part of your program or experience. It is frequently bypassed in the development process. Choose one specific “big idea” or theme. Then decide what you want the visitor to feel, learn or do because of your program. As Veverka says, “If you don’t want the visitors to use the information being interpreted to them, then why are you giving it to them?” (Veverka, 1994). Determining your success can be very simple. Did the visitors ask any questions? Did they interact among themselves about the topic at hand? Did the visitors model the interpreter’s behavior, such as picking up trash, avoiding a dangerous plant or actively listening to birdcalls? If you do not know why visitors came or what they enjoyed about your presentation, simply ask them. Beverly Serrell, a well-known authority on static exhibits, put it bluntly. “I used to think evaluation was optional. It’s not. It’s mandatory” (Serrell, 1996).

## **Develop a Theme, and Focus All Activity on That Theme**

A theme is the central idea of any presentation. Frequently, novice interpreters mistake a topic for a theme, failing to narrow, focus and support a single idea that the visitor can “understand.” The interpreter may choose to do a program on “trees.” “Trees” is a topic and a body of subject matter. A theme is a specific message about the subject matter, such as “The trees surrounding you are apartment buildings for local wildlife.” Themes are complete thoughts and sentences. Topics are not. The process of narrowing and focusing encourages interpreters to select interesting, unusual, important facts for their presentations and avoid generalizations. Good themes make the program’s development simple. Experienced interpreters know when they are struggling to find good visitor activities or fun information to include, they need to re-examine the program theme. Sam Ham makes several points about themes:

- “Thinking thematically focuses your attention and therefore reduces your work.”
- “Most audiences find thematic communication easier to comprehend and more interesting. When audiences know, in advance, what your theme is going to be, they are able to see the relevance of the rest of the information you give them.”
- “Most audiences will remember the theme, along with five or fewer main ideas used to present it. They will forget most of the rest. Begin your presentation with a clear, interestingly worded statement of your theme. End your presentation with a reinforcing, restatement of that theme.”

## **Select Resource Contacts and Methods to Support the Theme**

What can visitors actually do to help themselves reach the outcomes identified earlier in the process? If you have a good theme, this part should be less difficult. For the “Trees as apartments” theme, you might pass around chunks of wood from the local tree species. Allow visitors to examine the grain, feel the weight and predict the use for that kind of wood. Is it dense and therefore good for furniture? Is it a light, fast growing species good for fuel? Challenge them to look above and below eye level for shape and length. Which trees might be best for fence posts, floor planks or windbreaks (deciduous versus evergreen)? Which will break in the winter winds? For the informed interpreter, this approach provides plenty of room for

solid scientific fact. “Theme first” thinking keeps the interpreter focused on a central idea, rather than letting isolated facts clutter the mental landscape. Allow the visitor’s personal experiences and opinions to become part of the program. Provide opportunities for the audience to see how the information personally relates to them.

Avoid the temptation to “tell it all.” Beck and Cable quoted Anatole France, “Do not try to satisfy your vanity by teaching a great many things. Awaken people’s curiosity. It is enough to open minds; do not overload them. Put there just a spark. If there is some good inflammable stuff, it will catch fire” (Beck and Cable, 1998). The recipe for good interpretation includes a few good ideas, supported by credible facts, presented with direct resource contact.

### **Present your Program with Confidence and Enthusiasm**

Show respect for the visitor, the resource, and yourself. The visitor has chosen to spend time with your program, for whatever reason. “. . . Through our passion for the resources we interpret, we may bring out a similar passion in those we interpret to. To draw visitors into a full appreciation of the interpretive setting, the interpreter displays an affinity for the resource and a respect for humanity. We introduce visitors to something we love, not something we own” (Beck and Cable, 1998).

## **Audience Management Techniques**

A few techniques for live, personal services interpretive programs are listed. Good technique can also be gained from auditing tours and programs at your site or at similar sites. Take tours and participate in programs with your focus on the presenter’s technique and audience responses. Observe how visitors interact with the presenter and with each other.

### **Know Your Audience and Plan Your Presentation Accordingly**

This topic is so important. Well-planned programs that accommodate audience motivations and needs have few problems. When faced with the generic “general public” audience, arrive at the program ahead of time and informally visit with the group. Be prepared to change a technique or include different information based on your observations. One experienced interpreter advises presenters to have ten times the information needed for the program you plan to present.

### **Sit the Audience Down Whenever you Can**

Commentary that exceeds two minutes makes standing a problem. Shuffling feet, heads bobbing to gain a better view, “personal space” issues, and talking with each other will inevitably occur and distract from the presentation.

### **Consider Viewing Perspectives and Sound Qualities**

This is especially important on guided walks and nature tours. If you must point out an object at any distance, use some simple focusing tools, such as a cardboard tube, or other picture frame. When you practice your walk, take time to stoop down or climb a little higher. Look at your object from differing heights. Avoid having the audience looking into the sun while trying to look at you. The interpreter should be looking into the sun. When you must talk for two or more minutes, plan stops so that listening will not be a problem. When guiding a large group, walk

with the middle of the group instead of front or in back where only part of the group may be able to hear you.

### **Create a Distinct Physical Environment to Focus Attention**

All sorts of stimuli are bombarding our audiences all the time. Create physical parameters for the audience. Use shrubbery to form a wall, unusual seating objects, or simple visual cues to form a distinct space for the visitor's experience. This focuses attention and makes the audience more confident about their role.

### **Avoid Giving too Many Directions or Instructions at a Time**

This is critical with younger groups and mixed groups with wide variations in ages. Groups, being led through an action, may be very unfamiliar with it and may have trouble with doing activities that have become simple for the interpreter. Break instructions into groups that make sense. Take care not to "talk down" to your audience.

### **Modeling Behavior is a Powerful Tool**

Your persona will affect the audience. Your speech pacing, body language and actions will be reflected in the group, especially if they perceive you as an "expert." Act the way you want them to act. Do the things you want them to do. Feel the things you want them to feel. Challenge yourself to design interpretive communications that require no words.

### **Integrate Cultural and Natural History**

Look for ways to add the 'people story' to any interpretation of natural history, and vice versa. Always strive to show people that they are part of the overall picture. They are significant to the topic of your presentation.

### **Team Up**

Presentations using two interpreters can add interest; keep pacing lively and short circuit problems, especially with large groups.

### **Be Watchful When Passing Objects Around the Audience**

We want folks to touch and handle objects. It can be problematic, especially with younger groups. Kids often become more interested in getting to touch the object than participating in the presentation. Use multiples, teams, or other methods to control object sharing.

### **"If You Can't See it, Don't Talk About it"**

Try to find analogies, examples, or other physical manifestations for every topic, even the most complex.

## References and Recommended Reading

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